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### How dual is transnational identity? A debate on dual positioning of diaspora organizations

Halleh Ghorashi<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Culture, Organization and Management, Vrije Universiteit, Faculty of Social Sciences, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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# How Dual is Transnational Identity? A Debate on Dual Positioning of Diaspora Organizations

HALLEH GHORASHI\*

*Vrije Universiteit, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Culture, Organization and Management, De Boelelaan 1081, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

Within the social sciences, most studies of transnationalism take the approach that migrants experience a duality between place of origin and place of residence. In that kind of approach, transnationalism refers to a sense of in-betweenness caused by this duality. The aim of this paper is to show how the activities of an Iranian diaspora organization in Southern California (NIPOC) may seem essentialist at first but can be considered transnational because they transcend the duality of the past/place of origin and the present/place of residence. Through an example of an Iranian festival that is the creation of diaspora, I intend to show how national identity is detached from its assumed link to the nation state or 'the country of origin' and placed within a newly created imaginary space of a nation within a nation.

**Key words:** Diaspora Organization; Transnational Identity; Iranian Diaspora; Invention of Tradition; Duality; Hybridity

## INTRODUCTION

The dominant approach towards contemporary immigrant communities assumes that they have 'dual citizenships', 'dual lives', and 'frequently maintain homes in two countries' (Portes, 1997: 812), and that such a split positioning leads to 'dual authority and loyalty within the diasporas' (Sheffer, 1996 in Amersfoort, 2001: 14). These approaches presume, as their main point of departure, that immigrants experience a sense of belonging to their homeland. This kind of approach implies an essentialist way of studying the questions of identity, home, and belonging. The centrality of the issue of duality presumes a territorial approach in which identity is directly related to 'origin' and thus to 'roots'. When migrants' sense of belonging is mainly described through their rooted connection to their homelands, there is no doubt that the question of loyalty becomes essential. How could someone who is so deeply rooted in the country of origin not feel duality when living in another country? This approach can only be valid when there exists a strong and unchanging sense of rootedness in the migrants' places of origin.

The first objective of this paper is to show that the above-mentioned essentialist understanding of identity does not hold. This attempt is placed in the background of many other studies in which it is shown that notions such as 'homelands' and 'origins' are more complex than simply a link to certain territory or root (Appadurai, 1988; Malkki, 1992). These concepts have become gradually de-territorialized. It is within this de-territorialized framework that Hall (1992: 297) argues that 'modern nations are all cultural hybrids'. The heterogeneous

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\*Email: h.ghorashi@fsw.vu.nl

character of modern states undoes the old understanding of identity as linked to assumedly homogeneous national states or roots. There is a shift in defining identity that focuses on the processes involved in constructing, imagining, and changing identities. These processes include a variety of cultures and identities articulated and negotiated within newly created spaces. These identities are neither static nor monolithic, but rather dynamic, complex and hybrid.

This brings me to this paper's main objective, which is to show that diasporic organizations play an active role in shaping this hybrid, imagined positioning in the new country. By examining the activities of an Iranian organization in Southern California, NIPOC (Network of Iranian-American Professionals of Orange County), this paper looks at multi-layered and multiple connections, instead of bilateral and binary positions. It shows how the cultural and transnational activities of this organization in Los Angeles are more about creating a position in 'here' (read: the new country) than about dwelling between 'here' and 'there' (read: the country of origin), as is often assumed. The focus therefore lies on the diversity of meanings related to a shared common background that is by no means homogeneous or static. The question is how this common background is imagined and constructed to serve as a source of belonging that goes beyond the notion of nation-state. In other words, 'a place of origin' here is not a taken-for-granted point of departure, but is merely a point of reference that is helpful in the process of the construction of multiple identifications.

By focusing on the activities of NIPOC, I will also attempt to show that the process of identity formation and the way it is constructed involves sameness and difference simultaneously. By emphasizing and promoting a culturally distinct identity, difference is emphasized; however, the way this identity is embedded in the local society and relates to the present context brings sameness to the fore. In this way, the constructed Iranian national identity in California is not nostalgic, but is embedded in the present context. The past is important. However, its importance lies in its reconstruction in the light of the present. In this framework, Stuart Hall's conceptualization of cultural identity is useful (Hall in Woodward, 1997: 20). He mentions that identity always refers to the past, but we reconstruct the past once we lay claim to it from the present. In this way the past undergoes constant transformation.

Against the background of the above-mentioned objectives it may seem somewhat contradictory to use the term diaspora. The term may indicate a specific past-oriented identity, which could be considered essentialist. For this reason, the concept 'immigrant' may have suited this paper better. However, I find the term immigrant too neutral for the specific background of Iranians who have been forced to leave their country. The term does not necessarily acknowledge painful experiences of the past. In contrast, diaspora does include this element of forced displacement. Also, in the case of diaspora, the past is not necessarily something that urges people to return to it, but a background that exists as a basis of negotiations within the new setting.

Diasporist discourses reflect the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland, not as something simply left behind, but as a place of attachment in a contrapuntal modernity. (Clifford, 1994: 311)

In this paper, I follow Clifford's definition, in which diasporic life has the 'contrapuntal awareness' which concentrates on the 'here' and now, and where the elements of the past serve mainly as available discourses in the present.

Diaspora organizations often serve as safety nets for diasporas living in different countries, act as intermediary organizations between the individual and the state, and play an essential role in the new forms of identity and sense of belonging created by diasporas. Developing and sustaining transnational contacts with one's 'own group' around the world and within the country of origin is an essential factor in re-creating the past in the present. However, these

kinds of transnational contacts are not the focus of this paper. The concept 'transnational' here refers to the ways in which the construction of an Iranian national identity in California enables Iranian diasporas to feel Iranian yet be able to distance themselves from Iran as their original homeland. In this way the imagined Iranian national identity becomes transnational when it is detached from the borders of the original homeland. Thus, 'trans' here means: beyond the borders of the original nation state.

## IRANIANS IN LOS ANGELES

A sizeable community of Iranians lives in the United States. Los Angeles is one of the most multicultural cities in the country, with one-third of its current population foreign-born (Kelly and Friedlander, 1993: xi). Los Angeles, called 'Irangelles' by Iranians and some Americans,<sup>1</sup> has the largest number of Iranians outside Iran. The estimation of the number of Iranians in Los Angeles varies; it is estimated to be around 200,000, somewhere between the official numbers of 100,000 (by the census of 1990, Bozorgmehr *et al.*, 1996: 376, note 15), and the numbers released by the media (between 200,000 to 300,000 in the mid-1980s, Bozorgmehr *et al.*, 1993: 73). Sabagh and Bozorgmehr (1987: 77) distinguish between two waves of emigration from Iran to the United States.<sup>2</sup> The first wave arrived between 1950 and 1977 and consisted of students who were considered temporary immigrants, as well as other immigrants. The second wave came between 1977 and 1986, the years before and after the revolution of 1979. People in this second group are considered political refugees and exiles, whereas people in the first group are seen as immigrants. However, most of the Iranians belonging to the first wave became exiles later on because they were forced to stay abroad after the revolution of 1979.

The majority of Iranian diaspora in California opposes the Iranian regime. This opposition is either explicit, through diverse political activities or more implicit, through the way cultural or social activities are organized in the country. I will return to this later. The findings presented in this paper are the result of two different fieldwork periods in California. The first period was in 1997 (9 months) and the second in 2001 (7 weeks) after the events of September 11th. I started my research in 1997 as an Iranian woman having lived in the Netherlands, in exile, for nine years. Once in California, I was amazed by the ways Iranian culture was reinvented in that area. I participated in celebrations around the Iranian New Year (21 March) and other cultural festivities in which tens of thousands of Iranians came together. I also visited the celebration of *Mehregan* that takes place every October and is organized by several Iranian diaspora organizations in Southern California. In 1997 I investigated the impact of this festival and other Iranian cultural ceremonies on the creation of a sense of belonging by Iranian women living in California.<sup>3</sup> In that period, I used a range of field methods and techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and short interviews on specific topics. At that time the focus of my research was on Iranian community in general. The second time I entered LA was after September 11th 2001. During my previous fieldwork period I had attended one of the annual meetings of NIPOC, since this organization was the largest and the main organizer of diverse Iranian cultural festivities. In 2001, I wanted to know more about NIPOC, so I attended another meeting and focused on the activities of the organization more intensely. I also interviewed some of the members and founders

<sup>1</sup>See for example the title of the book edited by Ron Kelly and Jonathan Friedlander in 1993, *Irangelles: Iranians in Los Angeles*.

<sup>2</sup>See also Ansari (1992).

<sup>3</sup>For more on this see Ghorashi (2003).

of the organization. This time my main focus was on the activities of Iranian organizations and the ways these organizations have reacted to the impact of the event on the lives of Iranians in California.

In the following parts of the paper I will elaborate on the history of NIPOC, the aims, the activities and the image of the organization. After that I will write about the celebration of *Mehregan*. This celebration is just one of the activities of NIPOC; however, it is particularly interesting because *Mehregan* is a creation of diaspora. In the last part of the paper I will write about the ways that September 11th have influenced the way in which NIPOC presents itself as a diaspora organization.

## NIPOC

### The Network of Iranian Professionals of Orange County

NIPOC started its activities in 1986 as an informal gathering between friends, mostly engineers. Their idea was to create the basis for an Iranian community in the area in order to support each other in their work. They started networking and soon the organization grew. Mr Mesbah, one of the early members of the organization, shared his ideas with me:

In the beginning there were about 30–40 people who gathered in an informal way. We would talk to each other and prepare talks for each other. I remember one of my own lectures: 'how to start your own business.' I explained the basics of starting a business in America.

Later this initial goal became broader. It was around the mid-1990s that the organization started to organize large-scale cultural activities such as *Mehregan* (Persian Autumn festival) and Persian New Year. There are several celebrations taking place around the Persian New Year on the 21 March. For example the celebration of the last Wednesday of the year, the turn of the year on the 21 March and the celebration of *sizdah bedar*, which is the 13th day of the new year and involves a collective picnic outdoors. Through these cultural activities, many more Iranians were reached. At this time, the organization had two aims in mind: to safeguard Iranian cultural heritage and to create a connection between Iranian culture and the American community. There are different layers to consider in relation to the activities and aims of this organization. The first layer uses cultural identity as the basis for identity politics. In this way, identity politics enable Iranians to use their shared background as a source of empowerment within the new society. The second layer uses these activities to promote a hybrid identity through which the Iranian past is connected to the American present. These two layers, identity politics and hybridity, may seem contradictory at first; however, in the following parts of the paper I will show that this is not necessarily the case.

The organization that started as an informal gathering of 15 people grew to have 300 active members in 2001. Membership of NIPOC is limited to professional Iranians. The definition of professional is a broad one: it refers to Iranians with any kind of higher education. The Board of Directors ought to review and approve all applications. According to NIPOC's newsletter the main aim of the organization is to promote recognition of and to improve opportunities for Iranian professionals in Southern California. Although the majority of the members of the organization are first-generation professional Iranians, their activities try to reach an Iranian community as broad as possible. In addition, the organization has not remained a source for connections among Iranians only but has become a starting place for interaction with American society as well. Mr Alinaghian, one of the founders of NIPOC, expresses this point clearly:

Through these gatherings we wanted to reach a larger crowd of Iranians here and to create a kind of solidarity among them. But when we are with larger numbers it also has a bigger influence on the American society.

They can know us better and also can count on us more. For example they have registered *Mehregan* as one of the days in the city calendar [of Irvine in Orange County – HG]. When we can show that we are a strong community we can become part of the society even more. Then we make a difference and make it possible also for the new society to approach us. When we are not strong and have nothing to offer why should the new society accept us? Today, in our program, the mayor of Irvine and the chief of the police are joining us, because we have shown that we have something to offer, and we are important as a group for the city. The officials of the city support our activities very much. In the beginning they did not know who we were. For example, during the Iranian New Year celebration they heard from the Americans living around the Irvine Park that thousands of people went to the park and picnicked. They were afraid of fights. Later when they found out about our activities, they started to respect us for being able to organize such a big event. They told us that they had not seen 30,000 people gather in a park without a fight before. They now send us congratulations and support us in any way they can.

For NIPOC, the way to connect with American society certainly has to do with the image of the organization. The image that NIPOC presents is an image of success. First of all, it is about being an organization of professionals, thus emphasizing the idea of achieving success through education. Second, it is 'a strong organization' because it has the possibility to mobilize and organise huge crowds of people. Third, it is an organization with 'class'. The organization holds general meetings every first Thursday of the month in the prestigious Hilton Hotel in Irvine. The Iranians who attend the meetings are very well dressed, providing an image of upper middle class. During these meetings the first part of the programme consists of a presentation of a recently started business-man/woman to promote their business. During the second part of the meeting, successful professionals (read: VIPs) are invited to discuss several issues. To one of the meetings in 1997 the Iranian Co-Anchor of CNN World Report, Asieh Namdar, was invited. To another meeting in 2001, the founder and executive director of Relief International, the Iranian Farshad Rastegar, was invited. During these meetings, NIPOC does its best to keep up with the image of success, be it through the place that the meetings are held in, or the ways Iranians are dressed or through the famous Iranians who are invited. The same image of success is interwoven with the message of pride and peace that is carried out during the celebration of *Mehregan*. NIPOC has been the main organizer of the celebration together with some other smaller organizations of the area.

### Harvest Festival Mehregan

Phrases like 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992) or 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), are used by many scholars to emphasize the constructive nature of many cultural practices within new contexts. A perfect example of this 'imagined culture' is the celebration of *Mehregan*, one of the ancient Persian festivities. In ancient times, Persians believed in Mitra (*Mehr*), the god of light, love, knowledge, and commitment. The seventh month of the Persian year is called the Month of *Mehr*, and marks the beginning of autumn. *Mehregan* is celebrated to honour *Mehr*, but is also celebrated as the harvest festival, where preparation for winter meals was a reality of life.<sup>4</sup> This ancient ceremony has never been part of the national festivities in the recent history of Iran; it was only mentioned in the history books. In contrast, the festivities around the Persian New Year, also an ancient festival, continue to be celebrated extensively in Iran. When I was in Los Angeles, I was surprised to see the extent of the *Mehregan* festivities celebrated there. *Mehregan*, that I only knew from history books, had now become a national festivity in California, on a scale comparable to the New Year celebrations.

On 11 October 1997, I headed toward Lakeside Park in Orange County where a two-day celebration of *Mehregan*, entitled 'Annual Persian Festival of Autumn', took place. The first

<sup>4</sup>This information on *Mehregan* is from the pamphlet distributed by the organizers of the festival.



thing that caught my eye were the imitation Persian monuments all around the park. Various information booths about different regions of Iran were set up, with samples of the traditional dress of the area, dance videos, and pictures of the landscape. A large traditional teahouse was decorated with a dance stage for various traditional dancers. Several booths sold Iranian food. Cultural tents displayed the poetry of famous Persian poets, such as Hafiz, Khayam and Rumi. Some artists were writing calligraphy or painting and selling their products. First-generation Iranian immigrants came to the celebration with their families and some brought their American friends with them. Iranian teenagers volunteered to clean, help at the booths, dance, and guide people. Most of the teenagers with whom I talked were born in the United States. They told me that they loved learning about Iranian culture, and that this kind of celebration allowed them to contribute to Iranian culture; that is, the culture of the pre-Islamic era of Iran that dominated the festival. A huge tent was especially reserved for businesses selling a wide variety of products: diet foods, phone cards, and computer software, among many others. This strong commercialization showed the American impact on the celebration. On the first day of the festival the crowd was predominantly Iranian. The front page of the Sunday *Los Angeles Times* of 12 October featured a large photo of the festival. This may have accounted for the fact that a much more diverse crowd attended the second day.

Many scholars have argued that the practice of cultural ceremonies such as *Mehregan* is essentialist and thus static.

The opening song at Iranian New Year parties, *Yalda Nights*,<sup>5</sup> *Mehregan* Festivals, and weekly lecture series in many of these societies is the well-known 'Ey Iran' – a nationalist song eliciting the love of the homeland.... [...] popular approaches to Iranian national, cultural, or ethnic identity have been essentialist, static, monolithic, and idealistic. (Mahdi, 1998: 78–9)

If essentialism refers to a glorification of the past in order to re-create a nostalgic culture around a lost home, then is it accurate to consider *Mehregan* as an essentialist ceremony. Various rituals in the ceremony highlight a lost homeland. However, if it means, as mentioned above, that *Mehregan* is static and monolithic by reinforcing the boundaries between cultures, I disagree. In order to elaborate on this point, I need to introduce the concept of hybridity. Cultural hybridity is probably one of the most fashionable terms used within the social sciences to refer to people with mixed backgrounds (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1992; Werbner and Madood, 1997). It describes people celebrating multiple positioning by making choices about living with and within cultural difference. In this way cultural hybridity represents a dynamic and plural notion of culture while essentialism is about a static and monolithic notion of culture. The essentialist practice of culture has often been placed in opposition to cultural hybridity. In my analysis of *Mehregan* I try to show that this sharp contrast between the essentialist and hybrid practice of culture does not hold. I will argue below that the existence of nostalgic elements in the celebration of *Mehregan* does not make it an essentialist ceremony.

The celebration of *Mehregan* is not static, monolithic or idealistic, but instead it is dynamic, relational, imaginary and de-territorialized. *Mehregan* is dynamic and relational because it is a creation of diaspora and this creation relates directly to the new society in which it is practised. One of the core elements of the celebration is to show to an American public 'who we are as Iranians'. Detaching oneself from an Islamic background and stressing a pre-Islamic era is one of the ways to establish distance from the present Islamic government and the negative image related to it in the United States. In this way, *Mehregan* is also imaginary because it is not related to the cultural practices of the recent past in Iran but instead is based on a selection from the historical past, which suits the new context in many ways. This

<sup>5</sup>The celebration of the longest night of the year.



diasporic creation with its emphasis on the pre-Islamic past of Iran is meant to separate Iranian culture from the present Iranian state. Additionally, ceremonies such as *Mehregan* create a familiar space for Iranians living in the US to feel they belong to the new context through this 'imaginary culture' (Ghorashi, 2003). The de-territorialized character of the ceremony has to do with the place of its celebration, LA, and not with the physical space of its original homeland, Iran. Iranians in California are celebrating a culture that is de-territorialized from its physical roots. Thus, it may be that *Mehregan* has some essentialist basis because it glorifies the past, but it is also hybrid because it is both imaginary and de-territorialized.

### ***Imagining Culture, Imagining Home***

Many Iranians feel a sense of belonging towards an 'imagined culture' which is located in the new space many call home: 'California'. Many Iranians, both first and second generation, with whom I talked during my stay in 1997, referred to themselves as Iranian-Americans. This way of celebrating and practising their culture was, for these Iranians, directly connected to the space in which they were celebrating it: America. This way of being Iranian has to do with being American as well. The Iranian-American multicultural, hybrid, presence forms the basic condition for the celebration of *Mehregan* that from its part contributes to the creation of a new imaginary home called 'Irangelles'. Even if *Mehregan* may seem merely a reference to the past, it serves the present much more than it does the past. In other words, *Mehregan* is much more about 'now' than about 'then'. When I asked one of the members of NIPOC, who was also on the organising committee of *Mehregan*, about the reasons for this extensive celebration, she responded:

We [NIPOC together with other organizations – HG] wanted to have a celebration that was unique. The celebration of [Iranian] New Year in March is also very important. But for New Year, all Iranian organizations compete to have their own celebrations, so there are many parties at the same time. In addition, people have parties at their homes. We wanted to have a special date for celebration so that as many people as possible could attend. Another important reason is that we are living in America now. In America they have important celebrations in the fall. And we wanted to show that in our culture we also have a fall celebration and that our cultures are much closer to each other than often imagined. We wanted to make a connection with the American public. We wanted to show that we are not the same Iranians as the ones who are now in power in Iran. The message of *Mehregan* is the message of friendship and love, and it is this message that we wanted to send out to the American public.

According to the organiser, *Mehregan* is more than just a re-creation of Iranian culture for Iranians in diaspora. The nature of this re-creation is multifold. By creating a fall celebration in America the similarity between the two cultures is emphasized (celebrating a fall festival which is similar to for example Thanksgiving). Next to this emphasis on sameness, the extensive celebration of an ancient Iranian ceremony includes the construction of various kinds of boundaries as well. The first boundary is towards American culture (by emphasizing 'who we are as Iranians'), and the second one is towards the Iranian government (by celebrating a non-Islamic festivity). In this way the construction of Iranian identity through *Mehregan* is about sameness and difference simultaneously. By promoting a culturally distinct identity the difference comes to the fore, but at the same time the mere creation of this particular ceremony emphasizes the sameness. By emphasizing the similarities of 'also having a fall festival like Americans' and 'bringing the message of friendship and love' there is an attempt to create an imaginary space in America for Iranians: an imaginary home with an inclusive and not an exclusive message to Americans.

For this reason, the celebration of *Mehregan* is not about strengthening an exclusive and essentialist national identity that would lead to a sense of duality among Iranians in America. On the contrary, this celebration is an attempt to create a space for difference within

American society by bringing the Iranian past closer to the American present. This connection between the past and the present is made possible through the ways in which the past is constructed and reinvented in the light of the present. In this way, there is no sense of duality or in-betweenness in space (Iran or America) and time (the past or the present). The whole recreation of the past in the present makes a connection in time and space possible. Iranians remain faithful to their 'imagined' culture and yet can feel American at the same time. The bottom line is that this imaginary home makes it possible to be different and similar simultaneously, and thus not to live a dual life.

The example of *Mehregan* shows that organizing cultural ceremonies, even those with essentialist elements, can be a way of inclusion in a new society. In this way, emphasizing one's own cultural background can become a basis for negotiation and engagement in the new surroundings. In the process of negotiation between the past and the present, migrant organizations in general and Iranian organizations in particular can play a very important role. These organizations can serve as intermediaries between the individual and the state by facilitating collective activities and functioning as a link between immigrants and their new society. As mentioned above, NIPOC is one of the major organizations active in Southern California. The intermediary contribution of this organization became even more important after the events of September 11th, 2001: events that created a new challenge for the lives of all immigrants, especially Middle Easterners, within the United States.

### 'IMAGINED HOME' AND SEPTEMBER 11TH

When I entered the US for my fieldwork period after September 11th 2001, I was faced with strong patriotic feelings in Los Angeles. American flags served as a symbol of unity for American people but also as a statement to the entire world: 'We Americans are united as a nation'. It was interesting to investigate the impact of this patriotic feeling of Americanness on the hybrid positioning of Iranians in America. I expected that the new strong patriotic feelings in America would make minorities living in the US, including Iranians, feel out of place and rejected. I expected that the event of September 11th would change the sense of belonging that Iranians had felt when I was there in 1997. In order to investigate the position of Iranians after 9/11, I spent my time in California concentrating on the activities of NIPOC and their choices.

Soon after arriving in the US, I heard that the celebration of *Mehregan*, which is every October, had been cancelled. In an interview in the *L.A. Times* of 20 September 2001, the spokesperson of NIPOC, Ms Khosravani, explained the reasons for this cancellation. In her interview entitled: 'After the Attack; Persian Festival in O.C. [Orange County – HG] Canceled; Aftermath: To mourn with the rest of U.S., organisers decide not to hold the event, which was expecting 25,000 Iranian Americans', Ms Khosravani said that the two-day autumn festival was a celebration of peace, love, and nature and that in a time of national mourning there was no time for celebration.

Shortly after September 11th there were several critical comments made against mainstream sentiments and official policies. Arab-Americans and Muslim communities living in the US criticized the mainstream anti-Islamic sentiments that were growing in spite of the official statements against them. Radical intellectuals were also criticizing official policies introducing the concept of war soon after the attack. The concept was seen as a sign of preparation for a military attack on Afghanistan or other countries in the Middle East. The result of this criticism was that, in California, along with some other places, several demonstrations and gatherings were organized against possible military attacks by America. The statement of NIPOC's spokeswoman did not fall into either of those lines of criticism. Even stronger, the

position taken fell within the mainstream narrative of 'a nation in mourning'. But why did NIPOC take that position? In order to find out more about that, I interviewed some of the founders of NIPOC together with Ms Khosravani, who joined NIPOC in the 1990s. After the interviews I realized that there were more reasons involved than just 'sympathy with the nation'. However, that aspect remained central.

In answer to my question: Why did you cancel *Mehregan*? Ms Khosravani replied:

Because of September 11th of course. The atmosphere was not conducive to a party. All the country was in mourning. The Tuesday after the event when we had a meeting we all felt terrible. In that time of mourning there was no room for publicity about celebration, joy, and dance. Also we could not risk the safety of the people. There are always ignorant people, and we could not risk it. Another point was the financial element. Cancelling when we did meant that our loss was around \$20,000. If we had waited longer, the loss would have been much higher. Many criticized me for making such a quick decision, because two weeks after the event president Bush said that people should have their events. But at that time we did not know how things would go. If we would have waited two weeks before deciding to cancel, our loss would have been \$80,000. Also we were not in the mood for celebration. Myself, I was not able to function for a week.

While Ms Khosravani mentioned several reasons for cancelling *Mehregan*, the financial reason seemed to dominate. However, in the context of her previous interview in the newspaper and her following statements, the notion of 'mourning' or 'feeling terrible and not being able to function for a week' proved to be of more importance. What at first seemed to be a financial matter turned out to be an issue of identity. She continued:

To show our support to New York, we also collected money for New York. We placed a two-page add in the *New York Times*, together with other Iranian organizations active in Northern California and on the East Coast. In the advertisement, we announced our sympathy with the American people and placed the name of our organizations to show that we Iranians from different places in America were supporting them. We did that because we believe that American society has to see the difference between Iranians in America and the Iranian government. We wanted to provide that voice because no more than 5% of Americans know the difference between Iranians, Arabs, and others.

So, the construction of Iranian identity in diaspora through the interplay of sameness and difference comes to the foreground again, but this time with a different kind of emphasis. Before September 11th, Iranians in California promoted their difference through culturally distinct ceremonies and showed their sameness through emphasizing the similarities with the American context. After September 11th the focus was mainly on sameness with Americans in different ways. Iranians with their Islamic background could easily be associated with terrorism and become the target of hatred and isolation. For that reason, it was time for another kind of identity politics. This shift in identity politics meant less focus on the Iranian distinct cultural activities and more emphasis on the closeness of Iranian diasporas with Americans. This closeness with Americans meant strengthening the already existing boundaries with regard to the Iranian Islamic regime, but also constructing new boundaries such as the one with other Islamic communities in the US (as it is mentioned in the quotation: Arabs).

NIPOC's initiatives, such as cancelling the festival, and putting the advertisement in the newspaper, are some of the attempts to re-affirm and emphasize sameness through showing solidarity with the Americans. On 16 September, NIPOC and other Iranian organizations such as the Iranian Cultural Center of Orange County (ICCOC), Students of Irvin University and Khayam Educational Group organized a meeting together with the City authorities of Irvine in which sympathy with the American people was emphasized once again. Around the same time, NIPOC changed its name from 'Network of Iranian Professionals of Orange County' to 'Network of Iranian-American Professionals of Orange County'. This meant an even more explicit sign of stressing sameness through a claim of being American, a different kind of American, but still American. This claim on a hybrid positioning was far from being just a political move. It also had to do with re-affirmation of an already existing sense of belonging and a place called home which was under attack.

This point is of special importance in the case of first-generation Iranians living in the US. These Iranians were forced into exile because of the suppression of an Islamic regime in Iran. Many faced cruelties while living in Iran after the revolution, or left because they feared for their lives or the lives of their loved ones.<sup>6</sup> In short, the memories of the majority of first-generation Iranians living outside of Iran are of the suppressive side of the Islamic regime in Iran. In this way, it is rather obvious that the standpoint of these Iranians, with horrifying memories of the past, would differ from immigrants from other Islamic countries when it comes to the events of September 11th. Iranians who have memories of the suppressions of an Islamic regime in their own country could by no means put the attack on the Twin Towers and Pentagon into perspective. For them, the experience of a suppressive Islamic regime was too fresh to be able to criticize the official lines as other minorities or intellectuals did. One of the Iranian women I interviewed at a gathering in LA told me:

After the attack I had nightmares about Iran. I dreamt of those years that I was afraid for my life. I was thinking: I am not even safe from Islamic fundamentalists in the U.S. I am against killing in general. I hear people saying that what happened in New York was the result of American foreign policy for decades. I can understand their point. Yet, this time the attacks were too close to my worst nightmares.

By talking about her worst nightmares, she refers to her past experiences in Iran after the revolution. For these Iranians, the September 11th event gave their lives in America a new meaning. They felt even stronger than before that they were at home in the US. This feeling is clear in the words of Mr Alinaghian.

NIPOC shows its sympathy to American society. We want to show that Iranians are with them and sympathize with them. We want to show that our side is with Americans. We do not consider ourselves immigrants anymore. After so many years, we are one of them. We consider ourselves Americans with Iranian backgrounds. We love Iran, but we did not come here to go back.

The reactions of NIPOC after September 11th are in line with the celebration of *Mehregan*, especially in the way that sameness is emphasized. In both cases a clear boundary is constructed between 'us' (the Iranian diasporas in the US) and 'them' (the Iranian Islamic regime, or any extremist Islamic groups for that matter). The essential part of this boundary making is that it is not a boundary between Iran and America. Even in this period of crisis, there was no question of a gap or duality between being Iranian and living in America. The sense of belonging in California was such that the sense of home became even stronger right after the September 11th attack. The activities of organizations such as NIPOC have been strong in creating this sense of belonging, and re-emphasizing it even in times of crisis. This impact clearly has to do with the transnational character of the organization. 'Transnational' here refers to the way a constructed Iranian national identity is detached from the 'physical borders of the nation state of Iran' and is positioned within an imagined space called home in the US. This detachment and new positioning of the past in the present are essential conditions for the formation of a hybrid identity named: Iranian-American.

## CONCLUSION

Being able to bring a large number of Iranians together through cultural celebrations has given NIPOC a place within the city of Irvine in Orange County. NIPOC has become one of the important representatives of the Iranian community and a respected partner of the officials in the area. By organizing large-scale cultural events such a *Mehregan*, by inviting influential people to their gathering, and by the way they present themselves as an

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<sup>6</sup>See for more on this Ghorashi (2003: chapter 6).

organization, NIPOC next to other organizations in California has contributed to the image of Iranians as successful immigrants. In praising and celebrating cultural ceremonies, NIPOC has been able to use Iranian cultural identity as a basis for recognition and respect within the community. This celebratory part of culture is, however, far from being merely essentialist. The main aspect of its success has to do with its relational and imaginary character, something that has made it possible to create a 'present past'. This presence of the past in the 'here' and 'now' contributes to a sense of belonging for Iranians in the new context. This sense of belonging includes both the past and the present through which a hybrid positioning, or a claim of being both American and Iranian, emerges.

The positioning as Iranian-Americans is not only hybrid, it is also transnational because it is the result of a process in which cultural identity is de-territorialized from the physical boundaries of 'the country of origin' and goes through the process of hybridization. Even stronger, constructing this specific kind of Iranian national identity is mainly possible because of the newly created space: an imaginary space that is located in the US. Thus, a new space is created to host the multiplicity of both Iranian-ness and Americanness. This positioning is certainly not about a duality of cultures but about the feeling of being different but the same: it is about being American but differently American. Through this hybrid positioning, no duality is created, but instead a potential duality is solved. In this way, the constructed national identity is detached from its presumed link to the nation state or 'the country of origin' and placed within a newly created imaginary space of a nation within a nation.

The experiences after September 11th show that Iranians in America remain active participants in reclaiming their hybrid identity against the background of an imaginary space called home, even in a time of crisis. The contribution of transnational organizations such as NIPOC is essential in this process. They contribute to the creation of a sense of belonging through practising culture in an imaginary fashion, something that is only possible outside the borders of the original homeland. An imaginary past is created based on the interaction and negotiations within the new context. This imaginary past serves as a point of empowerment in order to safeguard the newly created space called home: a home away from the 'original home'. California would not be the same for Iranian diasporas if it were not for these cultural celebrations of the past. These celebrations would not be the same if they were not practised in California. It is this interconnectedness of the culture with the new space that makes a celebration such as *Mehregan* hybrid and transnational. It is these kinds of celebrations and activities that make it possible for Iranians to claim the new space as theirs: a claim that cannot easily be undone during times of crisis or unexpected events.

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